PARKER PYNE

Agatha Christie

THE GATE OF BAGHDAD

A SHORT STORY

The Gate of Baghdad

A Parker Pyne Short Story

by Agatha Christie

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The Gate of Baghdad

‘The Gate of Baghdad’ was first published as ‘At the Gate of Baghdad’ in Nash’s Pall Mall, June 1933.

‘Four great gates has the city of Damascus …’

Mr Parker Pyne repeated Flecker’s lines softly to himself.

‘Postern of Fate, the Desert Gate, Disaster’s Cavern, Fort of Fear,
The Portal of Baghdad am I, the Doorway of Diarbekir.’

He was standing in the streets of Damascus and drawn up outside the Oriental Hotel he saw one of the huge six-wheeled Pullmans that was to transport him and eleven other people across the desert to Baghdad on the morrow.

‘Pass not beneath, O Caravan, or pass not singing. Have you heard
That silence where the birds are dead yet something pipeth like a bird? Pass out beneath, O Caravan, Doom’s Caravan, Death’s Caravan!’

Something of a contrast now. Formerly the Gate of Baghdad *had* been the gate of Death. Four hundred miles of desert to traverse by caravan. Long weary months of travel. Now the ubiquitous petrol-fed monsters did the journey in thirty-six hours.

‘What were you saying, Mr Parker Pyne?’

It was the eager voice of Miss Netta Pryce, youngest and most charming of the tourist race. Though encumbered by a stern aunt with the suspicion of a beard and a thirst for Biblical knowledge, Netta managed to enjoy herself in many frivolous ways of which the elder Miss Pryce might possibly have not approved.

Mr Parker Pyne repeated Flecker's lines to her.

'How thrilling,' said Netta.

Three men in Air Force uniform were standing near and one of them, an admirer of Netta's, struck in.

'There are still thrills to be got out of the journey,' he said. 'Even nowadays the convoy is occasionally shot up by bandits. Then there's losing yourself – that happens sometimes. And we are sent out to find you. One fellow was lost for five days in the desert. Luckily he had plenty of water with him. Then there are the bumps. Some bumps! One man was killed. It's the truth I'm telling you! He was asleep and his head struck the top of the car and it killed him.'

'In the six-wheeler, Mr O'Rourke?' demanded the elder Miss Pryce.

'No – not in the six-wheeler,' admitted the young man.

'But we must do some sight-seeing,' cried Netta.

Her aunt drew out a guide book.

Netta edged away.

'I know she'll want me to go to some place where St Paul was lowered out of a window,' she whispered. 'And I do so want to see the bazaars.'

O'Rourke responded promptly.

'Come with me. We'll start down the Street called Straight –'

They drifted off.

Mr Parker Pyne turned to a quiet man standing beside him, Hensley by name. He belonged to the public works department of Baghdad.

'Damascus is a little disappointing when one sees it for the first time,' he said apologetically. 'A little civilized. Trams and modern houses and shops.'

Hensley nodded. He was a man of few words.

'Not got – back of beyond – when you think you have,' he jerked out.

Another man drifted up, a fair young man wearing an old Etonian tie. He had an amiable but slightly vacant face which at the moment looked worried. He and Hensley were in the same department.

'Hello, Smethurst,' said his friend. 'Lost anything?'

Captain Smethurst shook his head. He was a young man of somewhat slow intellect.

'Just looking round,' he said vaguely. Then he seemed to rouse himself. 'Ought to have a beano tonight. What?'

The two friends went off together. Mr Parker Pyne bought a local paper printed in French.

He did not find it very interesting. The local news meant nothing to him and nothing of importance seemed to be going on elsewhere. He found a few paragraphs headed *Londres*.

The first referred to financial matters. The second dealt with the supposed destination of Mr Samuel Long, the defaulting financier. His defalcations now amounted to the sum of three millions and it was rumoured that he had reached South America.

'Not too bad for a man just turned thirty,' said Mr Parker Pyne to himself.

'I beg your pardon?'

Parker Pyne turned to confront an Italian General who had been on the same boat with him from Brindisi to Beirut.

Mr Parker Pyne explained his remark. The Italian General nodded his head several times.

'He is a great criminal, that man. Even in Italy we have suffered. He inspired confidence all over the world. He is a man of breeding, too, they say.'

'Well, he went to Eton and Oxford,' said Mr Parker Pyne cautiously.

'Will he be caught, do you think?'

'Depends on how much of a start he got. He may be still in England. He may be – anywhere.'

'Here with us?' the General laughed.

'Possibly.' Mr Parker Pyne remained serious. 'For all you know, General, *I* may be he.'

The General gave him a startled glance. Then his olive-brown face relaxed into a smile of comprehension.

'Oh! That is very good – very good indeed. But you –'

His eyes strayed downwards from Mr Parker Pyne's face.

Mr Parker Pyne interpreted the glance correctly.

'You mustn't judge by appearances,' he said. 'A little additional – er – *embonpoint* – is easily managed and has a remarkably ageing effect.'

He added dreamily:

‘Then there is hair dye, of course, and face stain, and even a change of nationality.’

General Poli withdrew doubtfully. He never knew how far the English were serious.

Mr Parker Pyne amused himself that evening by going to a cinema. Afterwards he was directed to a ‘Nightly Palace of Gaieties’. It appeared to him to be neither a palace nor gay. Various ladies danced with a distinct lack of *verve*. The applause was languid.

Suddenly Mr Parker Pyne caught sight of Smethurst. The young man was sitting at a table alone. His face was flushed and it occurred to Mr Parker Pyne that he had already drunk more than was good for him. He went across and joined the young man.

‘Disgraceful, the way these girls treat you,’ said Captain Smethurst gloomily. ‘Bought her two drinks – three drinks – lots of drinks. Then she goes off laughing with some dago. Call it a disgrace.’

Mr Parker Pyne sympathized. He suggested coffee.

‘Got some *araq* coming,’ said Smethurst. ‘Jolly good stuff. You try it.’

Mr Parker Pyne knew something of the properties of araq. He employed tact. Smethurst, however, shook his head.

‘I’m in a bit of a mess,’ he said. ‘Got to cheer myself up. Don’t know what you’d do in my place. Don’t like to go back on a pal, what? I mean to say – and yet – what’s a fellow to do?’

He studied Mr Parker Pyne as though noticing him for the first time.

‘Who are you?’ he demanded with the curtness born of his potations. ‘What do you do?’

‘The confidence trick,’ said Mr Parker Pyne gently.

Smethurst gazed at him in lively concern.

‘What – you too?’

Mr Parker Pyne drew from his wallet a cutting. He laid it on the table in front of Smethurst.

‘*Are you unhappy?* (So it ran.) *If so, consult Mr Parker Pyne*.’

Smethurst focused on it after some difficulty.

‘Well, I’m damned,’ he ejaculated. ‘You meantersay – people come and tell you things?’

‘They confide in me – yes.’

‘Pack of idiotic women, I suppose.’

‘A good many women,’ admitted Mr Parker Pyne. ‘But men also. What about you, my young friend? You wanted advice just now?’

‘Shut your damned head,’ said Captain Smethurst. ‘No business of anybody’s – anybody’s ’cept mine. Where’s that goddamed *araq*?’

Mr Parker Pyne shook his head sadly.

He gave up Captain Smethurst as a bad job.

The convoy for Baghdad started at seven o’clock in the morning. There was a party of twelve. Mr Parker Pyne and General Poli, Miss Pryce and her niece, three Air Force officers, Smethurst and Hensley and an Armenian mother and son by name Pentemian.

The journey started uneventfully. The fruit trees of Damascus were soon left behind. The sky was cloudy and the young driver looked at it doubtfully once or twice. He exchanged remarks with Hensley.

‘Been raining a good bit the other side of Rutbah. Hope we shan’t stick.’

They made a halt at midday and square cardboard boxes of lunch were handed round. The two drivers brewed tea which was served in cardboard cups. They drove on again across the flat interminable plain.

Mr Parker Pyne thought of the slow caravans and the weeks of journeying …

Just at sunset they came to the desert fort of Rutbah.

The great gates were unbarred and the six-wheeler drove in through them into the inner courtyard of the fort.

‘This feels exciting,’ said Netta.

After a wash she was eager for a short walk. Flight-Lieutenant O’Rourke and Mr Parker Pyne offered themselves as escorts. As they started the manager came up to them and begged them not to go far away as it might be difficult to find their way back after dark.

‘We’ll only go a short way,’ O’Rourke promised.

Walking was not, indeed, very interesting owing to the sameness of the surroundings.

Once Mr Parker Pyne bent and picked something up.

‘What is it?’ asked Netta curiously.

He held it out to her. ‘A prehistoric flint, Miss Pryce – a borer.’

‘Did they – kill each other with them?’

‘No – it had a more peaceful use. But I expect they could have killed with it if they’d wanted to. It’s the *wish* to kill that counts – the mere instrument doesn’t matter. *Something* can always be found.’

It was getting dark, and they ran back to the fort.

After a dinner of many courses of the tinned variety they sat and smoked. At twelve o’clock the six-wheeler was to proceed.

The driver looked anxious.

‘Some bad patches near here,’ he said. ‘We may stick.’ They all climbed into the big car and settled themselves. Miss Pryce was annoyed not to be able to get at one of her suitcases.

‘I should like my bedroom slippers,’ she said.

‘More likely to need your gum boots,’ said Smethurst. ‘If I know the look of things we’ll be stuck in a sea of mud.’

‘I haven’t even got a change of stockings,’ said Netta.

‘That’s all right. You’ll stay put. Only the stronger sex has to get out and heave.’

‘Always carry spare socks,’ said Hensley, patting his overcoat pocket. ‘Never know.’

The lights were turned out. The big car started out into the night.

The going was not too good. They were not jolted as they would have been in a touring car, but nevertheless they got a bad bump now and then.

Mr Parker Pyne had one of the front seats. Across the aisle was the Armenian lady shrouded in wraps and shawls. Her son was behind her. Behind Mr Parker Pyne were the two Miss Pryces. The General, Smethurst, Hensley and the R.A.F. men were at the back.

The car rushed on through the night. Mr Parker Pyne found it hard to sleep. His position was cramped. The Armenian lady’s feet stuck out and encroached on his preserve. She, at any rate, was comfortable.

Everyone else seemed to be asleep. Mr Parker Pyne felt drowsiness stealing over him, when a sudden jolt threw him towards the roof of the car. He heard a drowsy protest from the back of the six-wheeler. ‘Steady. Want to break our necks?’

Then the drowsiness returned. A few minutes later, his neck sagging uncomfortably, Mr Parker Pyne slept …

He was awakened suddenly. The six-wheeler had stopped. Some of the men were getting out. Hensley spoke briefly.

‘We’re stuck.’

Anxious to see all there was to see, Mr Parker Pyne stepped gingerly out in the mud. It was not raining now. Indeed there was a moon and by its light the drivers could be seen frantically at work with jacks and stones, striving to raise the wheels. Most of the men were helping. From the windows of the six-wheeler the three women looked out. Miss Pryce and Netta with interest, the Armenian lady with ill-concealed disgust.

At a command from the driver, the male passengers obediently heaved.

‘Where’s that Armenian fellow?’ demanded O’Rourke. ‘Keeping his toes warmed and comfortable like a cat? Let’s have him out too.’

‘Captain Smethurst too,’ observed General Poli. ‘He is not with us.’

‘The blighter’s asleep still. Look at him.’

True enough, Smethurst still sat in his armchair, his head sagging forward and his whole body slumped down.

‘I’ll rouse him,’ said O’Rourke.

He sprang in through the door. A minute later he reappeared. His voice had changed.

‘I say. I think he’s ill – or something. Where’s the doctor?’

Squadron Leader Loftus, the Air Force doctor, a quiet-looking man with greying hair, detached himself from the group at the wheel.

‘What’s the matter with him?’ he asked.

‘I – don’t know.’

The doctor entered the car. O’Rourke and Parker Pyne followed him. He bent over the sagging figure. One look and touch was enough.

‘He’s dead,’ he said quietly.

‘Dead? But how?’ Questions shot out. ‘Oh! How dreadful!’ from Netta. Loftus turned round in an irritated manner.

‘Must have hit his head against the top,’ he said. ‘We went over one bad bump.’

‘Surely that wouldn’t kill him? Isn’t there anything else?’

‘I can’t tell you unless I examine him properly,’ snapped Loftus. He looked around him with a harassed air. The women were pressing closer. The men outside were beginning to crowd in.

Mr Parker Pyne spoke to the driver. He was a strong athletic young man. He lifted each female passenger in turn, carrying her across the mud and

setting her down on dry land. Madame Pentemian and Netta he managed easily, but he staggered under the weight of the hefty Miss Pryce.

The interior of the six-wheeler was left clear for the doctor to make his examination.

The men went back to their efforts to jack up the car. Presently the sun rose over the horizon. It was a glorious day. The mud was drying rapidly, but the car was still stuck. Three jacks had been broken and so far no efforts had been of any avail. The driver started preparing breakfast – opening tins of sausages and boiling tea.

A little way apart Squadron Leader Loftus was giving his verdict.

'There's no mark or wound on him. As I said, he must have hit his head against the top.'

'You're satisfied he died naturally?' asked Mr Parker Pyne.

There was something in his voice that made the doctor look at him quickly.

'There's only one other possibility.'

'Yes.'

'Well, that someone hit him on the back of the head with something in the nature of a sandbag.' His voice sounded apologetic.

'That's not very likely,' said Williamson, the other Air Force officer. He was a cherubic-looking youth. 'I mean, nobody could do that without our seeing.'

'If we were asleep,' suggested the doctor.

'Fellow couldn't be sure of that,' pointed out the other.

'Getting up and all that would have roused someone or other.'

'The only way,' said General Poli, 'would be for anyone sitting behind him. He could choose his moment and need not even rise from his seat.'

'Who was sitting behind Captain Smethurst?' asked the doctor.

O'Rourke replied readily.

'Hensley, sir – so that's no good. Hensley was Smethurst's best pal.'

There was a silence. Then Mr Parker Pyne's voice rose with quiet certainty.

'I think,' he said, 'that Flight Lieutenant Williamson has something to tell us.'

'I, sir? I – well –'

'Out with it, Williamson,' said O'Rourke.

‘It’s nothing, really – nothing at all.’

‘Out with it.’

‘It’s only a scrap of conversation I overheard – at Rutbah – in the courtyard. I’d got back into the six-wheeler to look for my cigarette case. I was hunting about. Two fellows were just outside talking. One of them was Smethurst. He was saying –’

He paused.

‘Come on, man, out with it.’

‘Something about not wanting to let a pal down. He sounded very distressed. Then he said: “I’ll hold my tongue till Baghdad – but not a minute afterwards. You’ll have to get out quickly”.’

‘And the other man?’

‘I don’t know sir. I swear I don’t. It was dark and he only said a word or two and that I couldn’t catch.’

‘Who amongst you knows Smethurst well?’

‘I don’t think the words – a pal – could refer to anyone but Hensley,’ said O’Rourke slowly. ‘I knew Smethurst, but very slightly. Williamson is new out – so is Squadron Leader Loftus. I don’t think either of them have ever met him before.’

Both men agreed.

‘You, General?’

‘I never saw the young man until we crossed the Lebanon in the same car from Beirut.’

‘And that Armenian rat?’

‘He couldn’t be a pal,’ said O’Rourke with decision. ‘And no Armenian would have the nerve to kill anyone.’

‘I have, perhaps, a small additional piece of evidence,’ said Mr Parker Pyne.

He repeated the conversation he had had with Smethurst in the café at Damascus.

‘He made use of the phrase – “don’t like to go back on a pal,” said O’Rourke thoughtfully. ‘And he was worried.’

‘Has no one else anything to add?’ asked Mr Parker Pyne.

The doctor coughed.

‘It may have nothing to do with –’ he began.

He was encouraged.

‘It was just that I heard Smethurst say to Hensley, “You can’t deny that there is a leakage in your department”.’

‘When was this?’

‘Just before starting from Damascus yesterday morning. I thought they were just talking shop. I didn’t imagine –’ He stopped.

‘My friends, this is interesting,’ said the General. ‘Piece by piece you assemble the evidence.’

‘You said a sandbag, doctor,’ said Mr Parker Pyne. ‘Could a man manufacture such a weapon?’

‘Plenty of sand,’ said the doctor drily. He took some up in his hand as he spoke.

‘If you put some in a sock,’ began O’Rourke and hesitated.

Everyone remembered the two short sentences spoken by Hensley the night before.

‘*Always carry spare socks. Never know.*’

There was a silence. Then Mr Parker Pyne said quietly, ‘Squadron Leader Loftus. I believe Mr Hensley’s spare socks are in the pocket of his overcoat which is now in the car.’

Their eyes went for one minute to where a moody figure was pacing to and fro on the horizon. Hensley had held aloof since the discovery of the dead man. His wish for solitude had been respected since it was known that he and the dead man had been friends.

‘Will you get them and bring them here?’

The doctor hesitated.

‘I don’t like –’ he muttered. He looked again at that pacing figure. ‘Seems a bit low down –’

‘You must get them, please,’ said Mr Parker Pyne.

‘The circumstances are unusual. We are marooned here. And we have got to know the truth. If you will fetch those socks I fancy we shall be a step nearer.’

Loftus turned away obediently.

Mr Parker Pyne drew General Poli a little aside.

‘General, I think it was you who sat across the aisle from Captain Smethurst.’

‘That is so.’

‘Did anyone get up and pass down the car?’

‘Only the English lady, Miss Pryce. She went to the wash place at the back.’

‘Did she stumble at all?’

‘She lurched with the movement of the car, naturally.’

‘She was the only person you saw moving about?’

‘Yes.’

The General looked at him curiously and said, ‘Who are you, I wonder? You take command, yet you are not a soldier.’

‘I have seen a good deal of life,’ said Mr Parker Pyne.

‘You have travelled, eh?’

‘No,’ said Mr Parker Pyne. ‘I have sat in an office.’

Loftus returned carrying the socks. Mr Parker Pyne took them from him and examined them. *To the inside of one of them wet sand still adhered*.

Mr Parker Pyne drew a deep breath.

‘Now I know,’ he said.

All their eyes went to the pacing figure on the horizon.

‘I should like to look at the body if I may,’ said Mr Parker Pyne.

He went with the doctor to where Smethurst’s body had been laid down covered with a tarpaulin.

The doctor removed the cover.

‘There’s nothing to see,’ he said.

But Mr Parker Pyne’s eyes were fixed on the dead man’s tie.

‘So Smethurst was an old Etonian,’ he said.

Loftus looked surprised.

Then Mr Parker Pyne surprised him still further.

‘What do you know of young Williamson?’ he asked.

‘Nothing at all. I only met him at Beirut. I’d come from Egypt. But why? Surely –?’

‘Well, it’s on his evidence we’re going to hang a man, isn’t it?’ said Mr Parker Pyne cheerfully. ‘One’s got to be careful.’

He still seemed to be interested in the dead man’s tie and collar. He unfastened the studs and removed the collar. Then he uttered an exclamation.

‘See that?’

On the back of the collar was a small round bloodstain.

He peered closer down at the uncovered neck.

‘This man wasn’t killed by a blow on the head, doctor,’ he said briskly. ‘He was stabbed – at the base of the skull. You can just see the tiny puncture.’

‘And I missed it!’

‘You’d got your preconceived notion,’ said Mr Parker Pyne apologetically. ‘A blow on the head. It’s easy enough to miss this. You can hardly see the wound. A quick stab with a small sharp instrument and death would be instantaneous. The victim wouldn’t even cry out.’

‘Do you mean a stiletto? You think the General –?’

‘Italians and stilettos go together in the popular fancy – Hallo, here comes a car!’

A touring car appeared over the horizon.

‘Good,’ said O’Rourke as he came up to join them. ‘The ladies can go on in that.’

‘What about our murderer?’ asked Mr Parker Pyne.

‘You mean Hensley –?’

‘No, I don’t mean Hensley,’ said Mr Parker Pyne. ‘I happen to know that Hensley’s innocent.’

‘You – but why?’

‘Well, you see, he had sand in his sock.’

O’Rourke stared.

‘I know my boy,’ said Mr Parker Pyne gently, ‘it doesn’t sound like sense, but it is. Smethurst wasn’t hit on the head, you see, he was stabbed.’

He paused a minute and then went on.

‘Just cast your mind back to the conversation I told you about – the conversation we had in the café. You picked out what was, to you, the significant phrase. But it was another phrase that struck me. When I said to him that I did the Confidence Trick he said, “*What, you too?*“ Doesn’t that strike you as rather curious? I don’t know that you’d describe a series of peculations from a Department as a “Confidence Trick”. Confidence Trick is more descriptive of someone like the absconding Mr Samuel Long, for instance.’

The doctor started. O’Rourke said: ‘Yes – perhaps …’

‘I said in jest that perhaps the absconding Mr Long was one of our party. Suppose that this is the truth.’

‘What – but it’s impossible!’

‘Not at all. What do you know of people besides their passports and the accounts they give of themselves. Am I really Mr Parker Pyne? Is General Poli really an Italian General? And what of the masculine Miss Pryce senior who needs a shave most distinctly.’

‘But he – but Smethurst – didn’t know Long?’

‘Smethurst is an old Etonian. Long also, was at Eton. Smethurst may have known him although he didn’t tell you so. He may have recognized him amongst us. And if so, what is he to do? He has a simple mind, and he worries over the matter. He decides at last to say nothing until Baghdad is reached. But after that he will hold his tongue no longer.’

‘You think one of *us* is Long,’ said O’Rourke, still dazed.

He drew a deep breath.

‘It must be the Italian fellow – it *must* … or what about the Armenian?’

‘To make up as a foreigner and to get a foreign passport is really much more difficult than to remain English,’ said Mr Parker Pyne.

‘Miss Pryce?’ said O’Rourke incredulously.

‘No,’ said Mr Parker Pyne. ‘*This* is our man!’

He laid what seemed an almost friendly hand on the shoulder of the man beside him. But there was nothing friendly in his voice, and the fingers were vice-like in their grip.

‘Squadron Leader Loftus or Mr Samuel Long, it doesn’t matter what you call him!’

‘But that’s impossible – impossible,’ spluttered O’Rourke. ‘Loftus has been in the service for years.’

‘But you’ve never met him before, have you? He was a stranger to all of you. It isn’t the *real* Loftus naturally.’

The quiet man found his voice.

‘Clever of you to guess. How did you, by the way?’

‘Your ridiculous statement that Smethurst had been killed by bumping his head. O’Rourke put that idea into your head when we were standing talking in Damascus yesterday. You thought – how simple! You were the only doctor with us – whatever you said would be accepted. You’d got Loftus’s kit. You’d got his instruments. It was easy to select a neat little tool for your purpose. You lean over to speak to him and as you are speaking you drive the little weapon home. You talk a minute or two longer. It is dark in the car. Who will suspect?

‘Then comes the discovery of the body. You give your verdict. But it does not go as easily as you thought. Doubts are raised. You fall back on a second line of defence. Williamson repeats the conversation he has overheard Smethurst having with you. It is taken to refer to Hensley and you add a damaging little invention of your own about a leakage in Hensley’s department. And then I make a final test. I mention the sand and the socks. You are holding a handful of sand. I send you to find the socks so *that we may know the truth*. But by that I did not mean what you thought I meant. *I had already examined Hensley’s socks*. There was no sand in either of them. You put it there.’

Mr Samuel Long lit a cigarette. ‘I give it up,’ he said. ‘My luck’s turned. Well, I had a good run while it lasted. They were getting hot on my trail when I reached Egypt. I came across Loftus. He was going to join up in Baghdad – and he knew none of them there. It was too good a chance to be missed. I bought him. It cost me twenty thousand pounds. What was that to me? Then, by cursed ill luck, I run into Smethurst – an ass if there ever was one! He was my fag at Eton. He had a bit of hero worship for me in those days. He didn’t like the idea of giving me away. I did my best and at last he promised to say nothing till we reached Baghdad. What chance should I have then? None at all. There was only one way – to eliminate him. But I can assure you I am not a murderer by nature. My talents lie in quite another direction.’

His face changed – contracted. He swayed and pitched forward.

O’Rourke bent over him.

‘Probably prussic acid – in the cigarette,’ said Mr Parker Pyne. ‘The gambler has lost his last throw.’

He looked around him – at the wide desert. The sun beat down on him. Only yesterday they had left Damascus – by the Gate of Baghdad.

‘Pass not beneath, O Caravan, or pass not singing. Have you heard
That silence where the birds are dead yet something pipeth like a bird?’

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About the Author

Agatha Christie is the most widely published author of all time and in any language, outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare. Her books have sold more than a billion copies in English and another billion in a hundred foreign languages. She is the author of eighty crime novels and short-story collections, nineteen plays, two memoirs, and six novels written under the name Mary Westmacott.

She first tried her hand at detective fiction while working in a hospital dispensary during World War I, creating the now legendary Hercule Poirot with her debut novel *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. With *The Murder in the Vicarage*, published in 1930, she introduced another beloved sleuth, Miss Jane Marple. Additional series characters include the husband-and-wife crime-fighting team of Tommy and Tuppence Beresford, private investigator Parker Pyne, and Scotland Yard detectives Superintendent Battle and Inspector Japp.

Many of Christie's novels and short stories were adapted into plays, films, and television series. *The Mousetrap*, her most famous play of all, opened in 1952 and is the longest-running play in history. Among her best-known film adaptations are *Murder on the Orient Express* (1974) and *Death on the Nile* (1978), with Albert Finney and Peter Ustinov playing Hercule Poirot, respectively. On the small screen Poirot has been most memorably portrayed by David Suchet, and Miss Marple by Joan Hickson and subsequently Geraldine McEwan and Julia McKenzie.

Christie was first married to Archibald Christie and then to archaeologist Sir Max Mallowan, whom she accompanied on

expeditions to countries that would also serve as the settings for many of her novels. In 1971 she achieved one of Britain's highest honors when she was made a Dame of the British Empire. She died in 1976 at the age of eighty-five. Her one hundred and twentieth anniversary was celebrated around the world in 2010.

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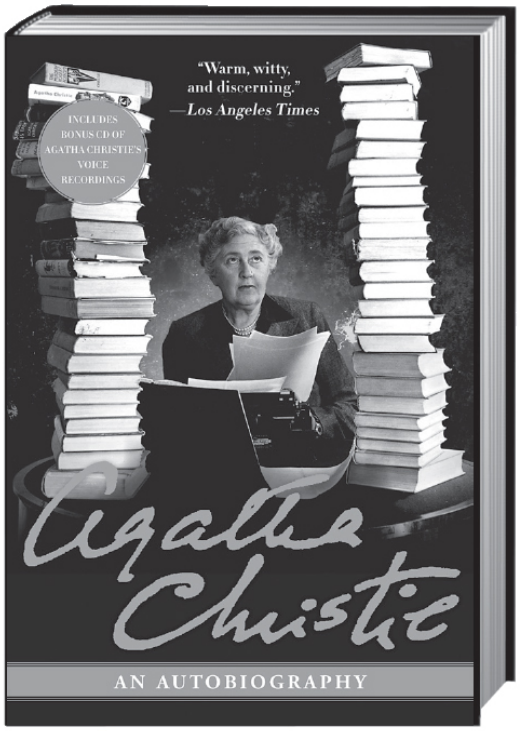

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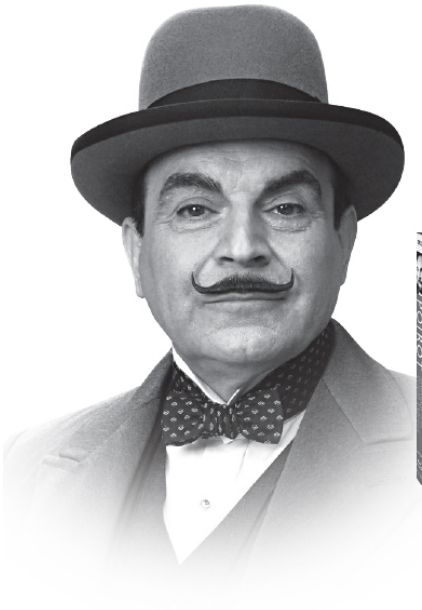

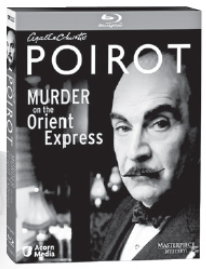

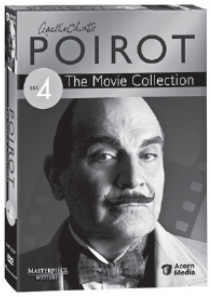

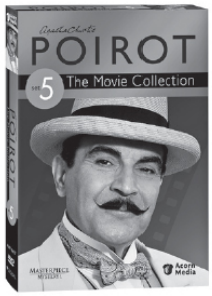

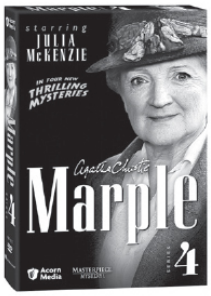

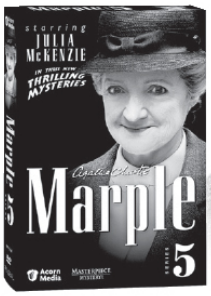

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